

Strong Faith and Building a Zen Center

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During a working Yong Maeng Jong Jin at Zen Center Berlin

Very often in the Zen tradition, Zen Masters have not made it easy for students to practice with them. Initially the student is presented with some sort of test. One of the most famous Zen stories is that of Hui Ko. Hui Ko visited Bodhidharma and asked to be taught. Bodhidharma ignored Hui Ko for seven days. Hui Ko waited in the snow and it was icy cold. So finally Hui Ko cut his arm off to show his earnestness in wanting to be taught by Bodhidharma. And then Bodhidharma asked Hui Ko: "How may I help you?"

Once there was a young man who was a bit of a dilettante. He would visit different teachers and afterwards criticize them saying: "This teacher is too old and the other teacher is too young. I don't like that teacher's dharma talks and I don't like the last teacher at all." He would try various ways but he always found a fault with something about the different practices. Of course he didn't have any knowledge himself and ended up being a "jack of all trades but master of none."

One day this young man arrived in a temple where an old monk taught and he decided to stay. He was tired of trying so many things and he decided that for once in his life he would stick with something and really give it a chance. Perhaps his reputation had preceded him, because as soon as the old monk took one look at him he exclaimed: "You want to be a student here? Forget it! Go away."

The young man pleaded with the old monk: "Please, I really truly want to be a student here. Please admit me!" However the old monk ignored him. The temples in Japan have a waiting room and the form for asking to be admitted involves the aspiring student to sit in the waiting room until the Zen master lets him or her in. Sometimes according to the different forms, students wait one night or three days and three nights or sometimes seven days and seven nights. During this time the student is not forgotten and is offered a little food.

The aspiring students cannot leave. If they return they have to start all over again.

This temple was not so formalized and there was no waiting room. But the young man decided to wait nonetheless. And after some time the old monk came out and seeing the young man said, "You are still here? What do you want?" The young man replied: "I want to be a student here!" Then the old monk replied, "No! You are not sincere! I don't believe

you! It is just a waste of your time and a waste of my time and a waste of temple resources. Go away! Do something else!"

But the young man would not leave. And after more time had passed, the old monk appeared again: "Oh! You are still here!" The young man replied: "Yes! I really want to do this!" The old monk asked, "Have you seriously decided that this is what you want?" "Yes! I have decided!" replied the young man. "Even if it means you would lose your life to be a student here? Would you do this? Would you give up your life to be a student here?" asked the old monk. "Yes, I would do it!" said the young man.

"OK. Let me ask you something. Is there something in your life that you do well?" asked the old monk. The young man thought for a while. He thought of all the things he could do. But what could he do really well? Then, "Ah, yes. I can play chess rather well." The young man had played chess ever since he was a boy. He was a fairly decent player.

The old monk said: "Good. We will test you now. You will play against one of my monks. If you win you can stay as a student here. If you lose you will never be allowed to enter this temple again. If you do enter you will lose your life. If you still choose to stay in this temple after having lost, then you will give up your life." The young man replied: "I will not leave even if I lose. I will give up my life." The old monk said, "We have agreed, then." It was very serious situation. Also the Zen monk was very serious.

He called one of his attendants. He brought a big sword. He summoned one of his monks who was a chess-playing monk. And he told this monk: "You have been a monk in this temple for many years. You trust me, I trust you. I am going to ask something very difficult of you. You are going to play chess with this young man. If you lose this chess game I will cut your head off. I swear to you at the same time that if that happens, I will guide you well in your afterlife." The monk said: "No problem. I agree." Then the young man and the monk sat down at the table with the chess board between them. The Zen master stood at the side of the table holding his sword, watching. (In those days the laws were different. Everything was legal because the young man had agreed to the rules. These days the Zen master would go to jail.)

So the young man had agreed. It had been easy to agree with words. But inside he was wondering: "What if I really

lose? I am a pretty good chess player but . . .” The monk was very calm sitting across from him. He had started the first move. The young man was thinking, thinking, thinking and as a result of so much thinking after three moves a mistake had already appeared. “Oh no! What shall I do now?” So he thought some more. And again after a few more moves, another mistake appeared. His position was not good. But what could he say? It was too late. No way out now. If only he could take back his word, he would do it, but there was no way now. So finally he thought: “OK. I did something stupid. I made a foolish commitment and now I will die. Well that being as it is, I must die!”

Once he accepted the fact that he would die, his thinking disappeared and then the chess board became very clear and slowly he began to make very good moves, his position changed and became stronger. Suddenly he realized he was on the way towards winning the game. He relaxed and looked instead at the face of the monk sitting across from him. Then he thought, “What a beautiful face this monk has, so kind and gentle and so peaceful. This monk will die if I win. All my life I have been uselessly wandering around getting nowhere and achieving nothing. And this monk is such a treasure.”

Then looking again at the chess board, he decided to purposely make a bad move. Then another and then a third bad move which reversed the positions and again he became the losing player. And at that very instant, the Zen master raised his sword and smashed it on top of the chess board. Then he said, “Chess game is finished!” He looked at the young man and said: “Keep this kind of mind for your practice and you will never have a problem. Keep this kind of attention and this kind of compassionate mind and you will become a good Zen student!”

This is a true story. This young man became a great Zen master. A chess Zen master!

We always say that Zen is not special. Paying attention to your life is not special. This story points to that. We do what we are supposed to do, moment by moment. We do this completely and wholeheartedly. Not only Zen students understand this. Everyone understands this.

The other point which is vital to our Zen practice is the direction it takes. In the story the direction that the young man took was compassion. He understood that being a Zen student was not only for him, it was also for the monk and for others. He attained the point: “Why should this wonderful monk die so that I can become a Zen student?”

This Zen retreat has been a working Zen retreat. We have been working to build this Zen center. Sometimes checking mind has appeared, “Not so many people have been helping with the work.” Frustration appears. But we

think again about our direction. And then it is not important who is coming or not coming to work. Important is what each of us does. Do we do it completely and wholeheartedly?

We simply do what we can and our direction is that others will come and enjoy the fruit of this labor. This is correct direction.

Zen Master Seung Sahn says, “Zen means you must become crazy.” For most people building a Zen center and putting so much work into it is crazy! In Paris we are also building a Zen center and friends cannot understand why we have left everything behind and moved to Paris where we still cannot speak the language. They ask: “Why leave America? Why leave a good situation? Why do all this? You are crazy!”

Recently we received a phone call in the center and we were asked how many people were coming to practice. We said: “Well . . . ah . . . a few Polish people and, ah . . . two French students.” It is crazy! So in a way if you continue practicing it will lead you into a kind of insanity.

I have already mentioned that this retreat was a work retreat. Actually there are two kinds of work. Inside work and outside work. Inside work means keeping a non-moving mind and outside work means helping all beings. Building a Zen center is extremely important. If you look at this world and all the varieties of problems in our lives, then it is of utmost importance to examine the underlying causes of these problems or even diseases. Doing this we see that there are three causes: I, me and my. Eliminating I, me and my means eliminating the causes of suffering.

Building a Zen center means offering a place where everyone can come and deeply examine the mind and the causes of suffering. A Zen center is not actually a place but rather the people who come. Many people will come to this place and practice.

So building a Zen center is very important outside work.

Being concerned only about inside work is not correct Zen practice. Only inside work means nirvana and peace of mind only for me. Including outside work into our individual practice means living with a direction for others and not only for me. How can we share with others? This is a wonderful way and makes a lot of sense.

So I hope that everyone will continue this everyday working practice, everyone will soon get great enlightenment and save all beings. ♦

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